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SUBJECT: VATICAN TWO-STEP WITH CUBA: CRITICIZE EMBARGO, ASK GOC FOR CONCESSIONS

REF: VATICAN 109

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli requested greater mass communication freedom for the Catholic Church in Cuba during his visit to the island November 6 to 8. On his return to Rome, he criticized U.S. economic sanctions against Cuba. The Vatican's approach to Havana remains to press for progressive change in Cuba while restating its well-known opposition to economic sanctions. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Archbishop Celli is the President of the Vatican's Council for Social Communications, and was in Cuba at the invitation of the Cuban Conference of Bishops (reftel). In an interview with the Spanish news agency EFE on November 5, Celli expressed his wish that the Catholic Church in Cuba would have "normal and frequent access" to mass media, which are controlled by the state. In a separate interview with Vatican Radio on November 13 (after his return to Rome), Celli said he had asked Cuban authorities to give normal access to the airwaves to the Church. While noting that the economic cost of mass communication is an issue, Celli said government restrictions were the biggest obstacle to the Church's communication efforts. "They said they would think about it", Celli added.

¶3. (U) In the same Vatican Radio interview, Celli also criticized U.S. economic sanctions against Cuba. He called for the Obama administration to lift restrictions, because "undeniably, it is the population that suffers the most."

¶4. (SBU) Comment: The Vatican is not naove, and knows little has changed in Cuba since Raul assumed power. However, it takes a long view and would much rather continue to press for small incremental concessions than openly criticize Havana and risk the relative freedom of worship that Cuban Catholics now enjoy. The GOC has made small concessions to the Church over time. Taken together, they allow - in the Vatican's view - new avenues for the Catholic Church's pastoral mission. In order not to risk this incremental progress, the Vatican likely will shy away from international partnerships to press openly for political change in Cuba. At the same time, the Church will also continue to restate its opposition to economic sanctions to prove its independence to Cuban authorities. End comment.

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